



# News release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

## EUROPEAN DRUG REPORT 2021: HIGHLIGHTS

### European drug market proves resilient to COVID-19 disruption

(09.06.2021, LISBON — **EMBARGO 11.00 CET/10.00 Lisbon**) Today, the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** publishes its ***European Drug Report 2021: Trends and Developments***, the latest annual review of the drug situation in Europe (1). Based on data from 29 countries (EU 27, Turkey and Norway), the report offers new insights into the health and security implications of a complex and evolving drugs problem and of a drug market resilient to **COVID-19** disruption.

The report warns of the risks to public health posed by the availability and use of a wider range of substances, often of high potency or purity. It also describes how organised crime groups have intensified illegal drug production inside Europe to evade anti-trafficking measures, creating environmental, health and security risks. Drawing on the latest **EMCDDA** rapid assessment study, the report explores the recent effects of the **COVID-19** pandemic on drug markets, use and services (2).

**European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson** says: 'Drugs are a persistent and ever-present threat, affecting the lives of millions. The *European Drug Report 2021* provides the latest evidence on this vital issue, which corrupts the fabric of our society, fuelling violence and risking the health and security of our citizens. I am particularly concerned by the highly pure and potent substances available on our streets and online and by the 46 new drugs detected in the EU in 2020 alone. With the new EU strategies on security and on drugs, our Member States will have robust tools to address this emergency through a balanced approach, tackling both supply and demand, supported by the EMCDDA.'

**EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel** adds: 'The *European Drug Report 2021* illustrates just how much the drug situation has changed over the past 25 years, with drugs now a highly pervasive problem, impacting across all major policy areas. We are witnessing a dynamic and adaptive drug market, resilient to COVID-19 restrictions. We are also seeing patterns of drug use that are increasingly complex, as consumers are exposed to a wider range of highly potent natural and synthetic substances. We need urgently to recognise that, not only is a wider variety of people now personally experiencing drug problems, but these problems are impacting on our communities in a wider variety of ways. This is why I believe it is crucial, across the areas of social, health and security policy, to develop the evidence-based and integrated responses envisioned by the new EU Drugs Strategy'.

### COVID-19: what impact on drug supply and use?

***A resilient and more digitally-enabled drug market*** — Presenting findings from the latest **EMCDDA** trendspotter study, today's report illustrates how the drug market continues to adjust to COVID-19 disruption, as drug traffickers adapt to travel restrictions and border closures. At wholesale level, this is reflected in some changes in trafficking routes and methods, with more reliance on smuggling via intermodal containers and commercial supply chains and less reliance on the use of human couriers. Cannabis cultivation and synthetic drug production within the EU appear stable at pre-pandemic levels, with no decline seen in the detection of production sites. Although street-based retail drug markets were disrupted during the early lockdowns, and some localised shortages reported, drug sellers and buyers adapted by increasing their use of encrypted

messaging services, social media apps, online sources and mail and home delivery services. This draws attention to whether a long-term impact of the pandemic could be the further digitalisation of drug markets.

**From nightlife to homelife** — Evidence shows that, in the early lockdown periods, there was less consumer interest in substances usually associated with recreational events (e.g., MDMA) as people stayed at home. However, analysis of wastewater samples (available for some European cities) suggests that levels of use of most drugs bounced back as restrictions on movement, travel and social gatherings were eased in summer 2020. Among the worrying developments linked to the pandemic are signs of a possible increase in crack cocaine availability and use in some countries.

**Benzodiazepines in the spotlight** — Specific concerns are raised around the misuse of benzodiazepines, either diverted from therapeutic use or not licenced for medical use in Europe. A rise in use of these drugs is seen among high-risk drug users, prisoners and some groups of recreational drug users, potentially reflecting the high availability and low cost of these substances and pandemic-related mental health issues. Published alongside today's report is an EMCDDA study on the risks of uncontrolled 'new benzodiazepines' appearing on the NPS market, which have been linked to poisonings and deaths <sup>(3)</sup>.

## European Drug Report 2021: key findings

**Cannabis use remains stable at high levels, but increased THC content raises health concerns** — Rise observed in the THC content of cannabis resin (average range: 20%–28%). Health alerts warn of cannabis adulterated with highly-potent synthetic cannabinoids.

**Record cocaine seizures, a worrying signal of potential for increased health harms** — A record 213 tonnes were seized in 2019 (up from 177 tonnes in 2018). Cocaine purity has increased and more people are entering treatment for the first time. Preliminary seizure data in 2020 suggest availability has not declined in the pandemic.

**Stable amphetamine demand makes domestic production near consumers profitable** — Alongside the dismantling of production facilities in 2019, chemicals used to manufacture amphetamine were also seized in the EU, including 14 500 litres of BMK and 31 tonnes of MAPA (up from 7 tonnes in 2018).

**Methamphetamine production and trafficking highlight potential for increased use in Europe** — Both large-scale and smaller production facilities are being detected in Europe and large quantities of the drug are being transhipped through the EU to other markets.

**Risks to health from supply of high-strength MDMA products** — In addition to increases in the average MDMA content in tablets and the purity of powders, products with very high levels of MDMA are also being detected. Preliminary data from 2020 suggest there was less interest in this drug during periods of lockdown.

**Harmful potent new psychoactive substances continue to emerge** — Among these are new synthetic cannabinoids and new synthetic opioids. A total of 46 new psychoactive substances (NPS) were reported for the first time in Europe in 2020, bringing the total number monitored by EMCDDA to 830.

**Are less commonly used drugs posing increasing challenges for public health?** — These drugs include hallucinogens, ketamine and GHB. Worryingly, intensive patterns of use are reported in some settings.

**Large heroin seizures signal potential for increased use and harms** — Large volumes of heroin are still being seized in the EU (7.9 tonnes in 2019), raising concerns around the possible impact on levels of use.

**Organised crime groups intensify illegal drug production within Europe** — A total of 370 illegal laboratories were dismantled in 2019.

**Drug law offences increase, with cannabis possession and supply predominant** — An estimated 1.5 million drug law offences were reported in the EU in 2019; 82% were related to use or possession for personal use.

**First-time treatment clients for heroin use continue to inject less** — Although injecting drug use has been declining in Europe for the past decade, it remains a major cause of drug-related harms.

**Scaling up treatment and prevention is required to reach HIV and HCV Sustainable Development Goals** — Increased access to integrated testing and treatment services is an important part of reaching targets.

**Overdose deaths driven by opioids and other drugs highlight need for service development** — High-risk substance use and polydrug use continue to fuel drug-induced deaths in Europe.

**Chair of the EMCDDA Management Board Laura d'Arrigo** concludes: 'As Europe's drug problems continue to evolve, so too must Europe's response to them. The COVID-19 crisis has shown us the value of information that is scientific, evidence-based and comparable across countries. Today's report provides a timely analysis to help decision-makers keep pace with new trends and developments and identify areas requiring rapid action. The new EU Drugs Strategy not only defines for us the way forward but will further reinforce our capacity to act concertedly to protect the health, well-being and security of EU citizens'.

## Notes

(1) The *European Drug Report 2021* (24 languages) is available at [www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2021](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2021)

National data underpinning the report are available in the 2021 Statistical Bulletin [www.emcdda.europa.eu/data](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/data)

The report describes the drug situation up to the end of 2020, based on data from 2019 and, where available, 2020.

(2) *Impact of COVID-19 on drug markets, use, harms and drug services in the community and prisons — Results from an EMCDDA trendspotter study*, April 2021. Available in English.

[www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/ad-hoc-publication/impact-covid-19-drug-markets-use-harms-and-drug-services-community-and-prisons\\_en](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/ad-hoc-publication/impact-covid-19-drug-markets-use-harms-and-drug-services-community-and-prisons_en)

[www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2021/emcdda-releases-third-trendspotter-study-on-covid-19-and-drugs\\_en](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2021/emcdda-releases-third-trendspotter-study-on-covid-19-and-drugs_en)

(3) *New benzodiazepines in Europe – a review*. Available in English.

[www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/technical-reports/new-benzodiazepines-europe-review\\_en](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/technical-reports/new-benzodiazepines-europe-review_en)

[www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2021](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2021)